

Georgian Politics after the Parliamentary Elections

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Legitimacy Crisis: How Georgia's Elections Were Rigged

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Abstract

Georgia's October 2024 parliamentary elections have triggered a political crisis, with widespread allegations of electoral fraud undermining the legitimacy of the ruling Georgian Dream (GD) party's fourth consecutive victory. Opposition parties have rejected the results and boycotted parliament. Massive protests continue across the country. This analysis does not examine post-election developments but provides a comprehensive overview of the patterns and evidence indicating election manipulation. It delves into statistical anomalies and discrepancies between the official results and independent exit polls, which raise serious doubts about the election's integrity. Additionally, it details the systemic and multi-layered rigging tactics—including the exploitation of voters' personal data, voter coercion, and large-scale abuse of state resources—that distorted the outcome and failed to reflect the will of the electorate.

Introduction

Georgia's October 2024 parliamentary elections, which saw the ruling Georgian Dream party secure a fourth term, have sparked widespread domestic and international non-recognition due to credible allegations of systemic electoral fraud. With opposition parties boycotting parliament and protests erupting in Tbilisi and other main cities, the country faces a deepening legitimacy crisis. Observers report sophisticated manipulation tactics that altered the election outcome, undermining the will of a pro-European electorate. The European Parliament has responded by demanding a rerun of the elections under international supervision, EU sanctions against Georgia's prime minister and top officials, and a shift in government policies to align with the country's Euro-Atlantic aspirations. These developments mark a critical juncture for Georgia's democratic future.

Approximately 60% of Georgian voters participated in what was widely considered a defining election. The election offered voters a choice: either extend Georgian Dream's 12-year rule for another term or pave the way for a coalition government composed of opposition parties, potentially breaking the cycle of one-party dominance. The election was also seen as a referendum on Georgia's future direction—either aligning with Euro-Atlantic institutions or deeper entanglement with Russia. With an overwhelming majority of voters expressing strong support for a European future, the victory of the anti-Western Georgian Dream party left many puzzled.

According to the Central Election Commission's (CEC) official results, GD garnered an unprecedented 54% of the vote, while four opposition parties and electoral alliances—surpassing the 5% threshold required for parliamentary representation—managed to collectively secure around 38%. However, neither the opposition parties nor the president of Georgia accepted the election outcome, citing observer reports and exit polls

that showed the opposition performing significantly better than the official tally reflects. They argued that widespread and systemic election fraud significantly altered the results and thus the election failed to reflect the true will of the Georgian people. On October 28, thousands of citizens flooded the streets of Tbilisi to protest what they called a “stolen election.” Since then, periodic demonstrations have erupted in the capital. The president of Georgia filed a complaint with the Constitutional Court over the violation of voters' constitutional rights: the secrecy of the vote and universal suffrage, which was limited for Georgian voters abroad. Despite the legal limitation, the first session of the Parliament was convened on November 25, with GD sitting alone. Opposition parties have boycotted parliament and plan to renounce their mandates.

So far, credible evidence has emerged showing the election was rigged through a range of sophisticated tactics. While elections in Georgia have consistently faced criticism for falling short of being fully free and fair, the latest election appears to have introduced a new level of sophistication in electoral fraud that key civic and political actors failed to anticipate. This article aims to outline the key arguments and synthesize credible evidence suggesting that the election outcome was skewed.

Making Sense of the Election Results

Many argue that the official election results defy basic plausibility. According to the official count, Georgian Dream increased its vote share from 48.2% in 2020 to 53.9% in 2024, equating to 191,942 additional GD voters. Yet this uptick raises questions, especially considering the broader political context.

Given recent controversies surrounding the government's policies, such as the passage of the “Foreign Influence Transparency” law (often referred to as the Russian Law or Foreign Agents Law), which sparked

massive public protests—as well as the ruling party’s increasing authoritarian tendencies—one would expect a decline in support, not an increase. The ruling party’s anti-Western discourse and its alignment with Russia, which halted the EU integration and paused US assistance to Georgia, further amplifies the improbability of such a rise in votes.

General Outlook

International observation missions cast a shadow over the legitimacy of an election by withholding their ultimate judgment on electoral success: whether they were free and fair. The OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (OSCE/ODIHR), in particular, did not include this crucial assessment in its preliminary report of Georgia’s recent election

In many competitive authoritarian contexts, electoral manipulation begins long before voting day. Regimes seeking to maintain the appearance of democracy often deploy coercion, bribery, and other forms of influence to shape the political landscape in their favor. This election was no exception. The ruling party’s extensive use of administrative resources and pervasive control over election administration at all levels drew widespread criticism from both local and international observers. These two critical issues tilted the playing field in favor of the ruling party. This was confirmed by other international missions like the European Network of Election Monitoring Organizations (ENEMO), National Democratic Institute (NDI) and International Republican Institute (IRI).

The use of administrative resources included both overt and subtle tactics aimed at pressuring public sector employees, especially in the education sector, to support the ruling party. Many feared losing social benefits and reported being intimidated into backing the ruling party. Likewise, supporters of the opposition were subject to direct harassment and threats. In parallel, several changes to the election framework further entrenched the ruling party’s control. These included the cancellation of the opposition-nominated deputy chairperson position, changes in the CEC decision-making rules, and the disbanding of the CEC’s advisory group. These changes allowed Georgian Dream to take control over election administration at practically all levels.

Local observation missions reported a range of irregularities on voting day too, including widespread voter tracking, breaches of ballot secrecy, and discrepancies in voter registration and inking procedures. Beyond procedural flaws, reports of violence aimed at voters, party representatives, and election monitors were widespread, contributing to an atmosphere of fear and uncertainty.

The evidence collected by local observer groups and independent investigative journalists reveals a disturb-

ing pattern of manipulation, including the illegal processing of personal data, “carousel voting,” and the strategic exploitation of administrative power to sway the vote. These tactics—while difficult to qualify in their impact—point to a systemic effort to subvert the democratic process and maintain the status quo in favor of the ruling party.

Trends Signaling Manipulation

Several key trendlines emerged after the elections that suggest something unusual—anomalies that, while not definitive proof of electoral falsification, point to deviations from expected patterns that warrant deeper scrutiny.

Two independent exit polls, conducted by Edison Research and HarrisX, placed GD’s support in the 41–44% range—well below the 53.9% claimed by the CEC. Both polls, while funded by opposition groups, have strong credibility—Edison Research has a proven track record of accurately predicting results in past elections and HarrisX is well-recognized globally for its credible methodology.

HarrisX’s post-election analysis revealed a significant discrepancy, even after adjusting their data to account for the CEC’s figures and correcting for non-response bias. The analysis shows an 8% difference—equivalent to roughly 172,523 votes—between their results and the official count. Moreover, HarrisX identified 27 electoral districts with large statistical anomalies, such as the Marneuli district, where the exit poll showed 40% support for GD, while the CEC reported 80% (a practically impossible 40% variance). Such discrepancies raise serious questions about the reliability of the official results and suggest the possibility of manipulation or fraud.

Statistical analysis further corroborates these suspicions. Roman Udot, a former board member of the Movement Golos, a Russian election monitoring organization and one of the first targets of Moscow’s “Foreign Agents Law,” conducted a statistical review of the CEC data, revealing what he dubbed the “Russian Tale.” In a free and fair election, the distribution of support for the ruling party across polling stations forms a bell shape, following a normal distribution. However, Udot found that the support for GD across polling stations did not follow this pattern. Instead, it exhibited a “tail” on the high end—an abnormal concentration of pro-GD results—a phenomenon often associated with rigged elections in authoritarian regimes. This “Russian Tale” suggests an artificial inflation of support for the ruling party in certain areas.

Udot’s analysis also highlighted a concerning correlation between voter turnout and support for GD, particularly in rural areas. In a fair election, the proportion of votes for each party should remain consistent regardless of turnout levels. However, the analysis found that

in areas with unusually high turnout, GD's vote share disproportionately increased. This pattern suggests that in some precincts, inflated voter turnout may have been artificially manufactured, with additional votes being cast for the ruling party through ballot stuffing or other fraudulent means.

Further scrutiny of voter turnout data by the local watchdog, ISFED, added another layer of concern. ISFED's analysis of voter turnout according to gender revealed significant irregularities. In 62 precincts, male voter turnout ranged from 80–100%, while female turnout in these same precincts averaged only 57%. More troubling still, ISFED found cases where male voter turnout exceeded 100%, a statistical impossibility. Such discrepancies, coupled with the other irregularities, suggest a deliberate effort to skew the results.

Anomalies are evident and clearly point to manipulation; however, the question remains as to how these elections were manipulated? What specific tactics were employed to manipulate the vote? The following sections delve into key factors and tactics that likely contributed to these anomalies, shedding light on the possible methods of election fraud.

Exploitation of Administrative Resources and Voter Pressure

One method of manipulation is gaining control over election administration. In Georgia's most recent elections, the ruling party wielded unprecedented control over administrative resources, tilting the playing field in its favor. This manipulation of the state apparatus played a central role in shaping the election outcome.

By 2023, the government employed a record 320,500 civil servants, marking the highest level in the past decade. This vast public sector workforce, coupled with financial assistance directed to nearly 700,000 citizens—approximately 18.3% of the population in a country where 11% live below the absolute poverty line—provided an avenue for coercion and political influence.

In the run-up to the election, GD intensified its mobilization efforts. State workers and recipients of social assistance were coerced to support GD through explicit threats or veiled promises of rewards. This manipulation extended to local government officials, who were expected to exert similar pressure on their communities. The education sector—a key area for state control—also played a central role in these efforts. There have been multiple reports of teachers and other education staff being pressured to participate in campaign events and mobilize voters in support of the ruling party.

Meanwhile, a more insidious method of voter manipulation involved offering state benefits in exchange for votes. Under Georgian law, voter bribery is a criminal offense; however, there were widespread reports of

GD activists distributing goods, fuel vouchers, or even state services in return for electoral support. Particularly in rural and minority-populated regions—such as Ninotsminda, a district with a large Armenian population—GD's support appeared artificially inflated, with reports of near-90% backing in certain districts.

In addition, large sums from the state budget were spent on bonuses and allowances. In 2023, the government allocated GEL 413.6 million (approximately USD 146.4) for such bonuses, marking a decade-high expenditure. This figure does not include the additional resources spent by local governments or other state-run entities, suggesting a much larger total expenditure aimed at bolstering the party's electoral base.

The use of administrative resources—often manifesting as vote-buying—is not a new tactic in Georgia's elections. However, in 2023 and 2024, it reached a high point, likely playing a role in distorting the election results.

Allegations of Voter ID Confiscation and Multiple Voting

The 2024 elections have also been marred by extensive allegations of multiple voting and voter ID fraud, with reports pointing to organized efforts to exploit voter IDs and election procedures to manipulate the outcome. Central to these tactics is the illegal confiscation and the use of voter ID cards, a scheme that appears to have played a significant role in rigging the election results.

Reports indicate that both public and private sector employees, as well as ordinary citizens, including people with disabilities, were coerced or paid to hand over their ID cards in the weeks leading up to election day. The tactic was primarily aimed at ensuring control over who could vote and potentially allowing GD's loyal voters to vote multiple times under false pretenses.

Observers reported that some voters had ID numbers written on slips of paper, which they then placed inside their passports. Election registrars sympathetic to GD would register these additional ID numbers into the system, allowing GD loyal voters to vote multiple times. While the inking of voters' fingers is meant to prevent double voting, the evidence suggests that these measures were deliberately avoided. Election commission members engaged in the scheme would not properly ink voters or would not check the ink trace before allowing voters in the station.

As with many other elements of the election process, this fraud tactic was obscured by a lack of transparency. Some polling stations were deliberately arranged in ways that prevented observers from properly scrutinizing the registration process. Registrars' desks were often positioned against walls, effectively blocking any oversight. When observers attempted to get closer or request better

visibility of the registration process, they were routinely obstructed or even expelled from polling stations. This deliberate evasion of scrutiny indicates a concerted effort to conceal and discourage transparency.

Furthermore, the CEC made a controversial decision in August 2024 to assign key precinct roles a week before election day, in contrast to the traditional random assignment on voting day. This change allowed the ruling party to strategically place its allies in key positions, such as registrars, thereby facilitating the rigging of the vote.

It is impossible to determine the exact number of IDs that were illegally confiscated, and consequently, how many votes were fraudulently cast in favor of the ruling party through this scheme. However, the scale of the operation appears to be significant. An indirect indication of the extent of the rigging is the “My Vote” observation mission’s call for the annulment of results from 246 polling stations across 29 districts, affecting over 400,000 votes. This demand stemmed from recurring and, in many cases, systemic violations, including issues with voter registration, ballot marking, and voter tracking—all of which suggest active falsification.

Subsequently, opposition parties called on the CEC to make the voter database available on a neutral platform, allowing voters to check whether their vote was actually cast and at which polling station. Such transparency would partially help reveal the magnitude of the ID confiscation scheme.

However, confiscated IDs were not the only method used for carousel voting. There are reports suggesting that the ID numbers of citizens who had left the country but had not registered with consular offices abroad may also have been exploited. The publicly accessible database which has been demanded from the CEC could partially expose this practice, but the CEC has not fulfilled this request. Furthermore, given the low trust in the CEC’s integrity, releasing potentially cleaned data later will not achieve the desired transparency. Notably, the illegal processing of personal voter information extended beyond the use of confiscated IDs.

Personal Data Processing

The credible investigative media outlet *Studio Monitor* aired a journalistic investigation based on over 1,000 internal documents, spreadsheets, lists, and both text and voice messages leaked from the GD offices. It reveals that on the election day, the party orchestrated a covert network of call centers in rented offices near polling stations. In this network, individuals referred to as “captains” were tasked with voter mobilization. Each “captain” was responsible for a group of voters, whom they were pressured to coerce into voting for GD. Participants in the call center operations were compensated in cash.

The investigation also uncovered that GD-operated call centers were strategically located near polling stations to monitor voter turnout. A network of informants at the polling stations and the call centers exchanged information, allowing the “captains” to track the status of their supporters. Voter data, including personal identification numbers, was accessible to call center staff for each polling station. These call centers communicated via a secure online portal, enabling captains to identify which supporters had voted and apply further pressure to those who had not.

While voter mobilization itself may not be illegal, the unlawful processing of personal data, voter surveillance, and the use of undisclosed funds to finance this operation represent serious legal violations.

The “captains” relied on a vast amount of personal data—carefully aggregated and including tens of thousands of individuals. Earlier investigations by *Batumelebi* revealed that GD had access to detailed personal data about voters that was collected without their consent. This information was reportedly sourced from various government agencies and included sensitive data about individuals’ health, drug addiction, past electoral participation, voting intentions, and more. This happened particularly in targeted regions. Notably, this data is classified as sensitive under Georgian law, and its use is typically restricted to relevant state institutions.

Hans Gutbrod estimates that the main targets of this data collection included public sector employees, recipients of targeted social assistance, voters in ethnic minority-majority areas, incarcerated individuals, and those on probation. He estimates that altogether data was collected on up to 820,000 voters. As outlined earlier, GD used this data not only to influence voter behavior before election day through incentives or coercion, but also to track and pressure voters on the election day itself.

Breach of Ballot Secrecy

One of the most glaring violations of the core principles of free and fair elections was the breach of ballot secrecy. In precincts with electronic voting—which account for approximately 90% of ballots cast—the ballot itself revealed the vote on the reverse side of the paper. At these stations, ballots were required to be inserted into so-called “vote-counting devices” using an open sleeve, rather than the closed envelope that had been standard practice. Numerous photographs documented that the mark on the ballot was visible as the voter inserted it into the machine.

This systematically undermined the principle of vote secrecy. And the secrecy of the vote is a fundamental requirement for any free and fair election.

Aggravating the matter, the GYLA had raised concerns about this with the CEC several weeks before the

election, warning about the flimsy ballot design. Realizing the issue persisted on election day, the GYLA filed complaints with district election commissions, calling for the annulment of results in all precincts where electronic voting technology was used. The organization emphasized that the secrecy of the ballot is a core constitutional principle of democratic elections.

The Tetrtskaro City Court judge ruled in favor of the GYLA's complaint and annulled the results from around 30 precincts in Georgia's southern municipalities. However, the Court of Appeals rejected the alleged breach of vote secrecy and upheld the disputed results. As the final domestic authority on the matter, the Court of Appeals' decision provided no further legal recourse. The GYLA now plans to bring the case before the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg. The Tetrtskaro City Court decision was a rare and significant move, demonstrating how other courts might have ruled if they had not been influenced and captured by the ruling party.

Limited Voting Abroad

There was unprecedented demand among Georgian emigrants to participate in the elections, but the government failed to meet this demand—likely because of the expectation of low support from the diaspora. This is logical, as many of these individuals and families left Georgia because of harsh social and economic conditions.

Georgia opened only 67 polling stations outside Georgia—a slight increase from 2020. More than 95,000 voters registered to cast ballots abroad, yet only around 35,000 managed to cast their vote. A poll conducted by the Georgian Association in the US in August found that 96% of respondents identified election accessibility as a major issue. The association shared its findings with both the government and opposition parties, but no action was taken. Election day footage shows long lines of voters who traveled from different cities to cast their ballots. Some were forced to leave after hours of waiting, unable to stay any longer.

Voting patterns within the diaspora offer insight into why the government may have sought to suppress turnout. In the 2020 elections, nearly two-thirds of expatriate voters supported pro-Western opposition parties, while GD received just 29% of the diaspora vote. This election saw a similar trend, with GD securing only around 14% of expatriate voters. Furthermore, the failure to ensure adequate access to voting for Georgians abroad violates the principle of universal suffrage. This is one of the complaints filed to the Constitutional Court, arguing that the rights of emigrants to vote were infringed.

Dispute Resolution

A relatively lower number of complaints—1,170—were filed in this election, compared to 2,054 in 2020.

Whether this decline reflects improvements in the election process or a more sophisticated election rigging scheme is open to interpretation. Notably, the courts rejected all the complaints submitted by the independent observation organizations. In the few exceptional cases where courts initially upheld complaints, such as in Tetrtskaro and Gori, those rulings were later overturned by the Courts of Appeals. The Tetrtskaro court ruled to annul the district results for a breach of voter secrecy, while the Gori City Court ordered a recount of invalid ballots from 15 precincts. However, both rulings were overturned by higher courts, highlighting a lack of judicial independence and integrity.

Observer organizations reported that the complaints adjudication process failed to follow relevant international standards and did not provide a remedy to the mass and grave violations observed.

Conclusion and the Way Forward

Thus far, Georgian society has largely converged around the conclusion that the 2024 elections were rigged and do not reflect the will of the voters. Opposition parties initially focused on immediate responses, declaring a boycott and mobilizing supporters to demand new elections. However, these protests were neither scalable nor well-organized enough to exert meaningful pressure on the government. Massive protests erupted later when GD's newly elected government declared the suspension of EU accession talks until 2028. The situation is constantly changing, with nonstop night protests across the week, though it remains to be seen if they can make any meaningful change.

Opposition parties struggled on two critical fronts. Both individually and collectively, they did not manage to establish themselves as a credible alternative to the ruling party. Their promise of a European future felt intangible compared to GD's campaign narrative, which invoked the fear of a war with Russia as a consequence of regime change. The opposition struggled to effectively counter or neutralize this narrative. Moreover, they neither anticipated potential election integrity risks nor managed voters' expectations of a potential victory. This dual failure has deepened public frustration and eroded the prospects for change. As a result, post-election protests have not reached the scale seen earlier, when the public rallied against the government's increasingly authoritarian and anti-democratic moves.

This signals another looming challenge of erosion of faith in elections—a legitimate democratic mechanism for removing an underperforming government. This loss of trust could have serious consequences for future elections.

Meanwhile, the ruling party, undisturbed by the opposition boycott, approved the new government and

set the soonest possible date for the presidential election, aiming to swiftly elect a loyal president through delegates. This is happening while a constitutional appeal challenging the legality of the entire parliamentary convocation remains pending. Even if the Constitutional Court agrees to hear the appeal, there is widespread concern over the ruling party's political influence on the Court.

Defeating Georgia's authoritarian regime requires a long-term strategy. Opposition parties will have to address the growing disillusionment with elections by offering genuine, alternative policy solutions that resonate with voters, as mere anti-status quo rhetoric has

proven insufficient. They will also need to strengthen voter mobilization and communication efforts. These are the basic variables of political success.

The transitional period is crucial for Georgia's future. The country is at a crossroads, struggling to move away from competitive authoritarianism toward more entrenched authoritarianism, in which no democratic institutions remain independent of government control and the integrity of the political system deteriorates. If Georgia slides into a more consolidated authoritarian state, it risks becoming further isolated from the West and increasingly dependent on Russia, a scenario that would be extremely difficult to reverse.

About the Author

Mariam Chikbladze is an independent consultant specializing in democratic governance and resilience, with expertise in elections, political party strengthening, and democratic oversight practices. She has extensive experience managing oversight institutions' support portfolios within USAID's governance programs in Georgia and has contributed to UNDP's key legislative strengthening initiatives. Previously, she worked on elections and political party programs at the International Republican Institute (IRI), covering Georgia and Armenia. In collaboration with the Alliance of Democracies Foundation, she facilitated a political parties' pledge for election integrity during Georgia's 2020 parliamentary elections. Previously, she led the Netherlands Institute for Multiparty Democracy's (NIMD) grassroots political education program across four regions of Georgia.

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Serving the Regime: Protest, Police, and Political Developments in Georgia

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Abstract

This article analyzes how the ruling Georgian Dream party reacted to the political protests that erupted following its decision to postpone EU accession talks, highlighting the party's shift toward autocracy through systematic repression. It applies the concept of "strategic incapacitation" to illustrate how protest policing has evolved into a tool for regime consolidation. It further explores patronage-based control over law enforcement, in which high-ranking police officials—appointed based on political loyalty—ensure institutional complicity in suppressing protests. The analysis concludes that protest policing in Georgia reflects broader authoritarian tendencies, where legal and extra-legal mechanisms coalesce to erode civil liberties.

Introduction

Georgian Dream (GD), the Georgian political party founded and led by pro-Russian billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili, secured its fourth consecutive term in the highly disputed October 2024 parliamentary elections (Ditrych, 2024). Soon after its victory, it escalated anti-Western rhetoric and postponed EU accession talks until 2028, halting a long-standing national goal (Menabde, 2024). This decision sparked mass protests that are still ongoing and which have been met with brutal crackdowns (Gabrichidze, 2025). Protesters have faced harsh protest policing, reports of torture, unlawful detentions, and unfair trials, while GD officials have initiated new restrictive regulations (Amnesty International, 2025). By the end of January 2025, approximately 500 people had been arrested on administrative charges and criminal cases were opened against 44 individuals, including journalists, activists, and students (JAMnews, 2025). This article contends that GD's systematic crackdown on political protests is part of a broader strategy to criminalize dissent and consolidate its hold on power. It further argues that the party has transformed the police into a key instrument for maintaining its regime, reinforcing patrimonial practices to secure police loyalty to the ruling elite. This article is based on document analysis and interviews with Georgian NGOs and activists.¹

Analysis

"Strategic Incapacitation" and the Abuse of Criminal Law

GD has criminalized protests to maintain regime stability. While restrictions on free expression have long

existed in Georgia, they intensified with the protests against the so-called "Foreign Agents law" in spring 2024 and reached a peak following GD's announcement to suspend EU accession talks. Criminalization of protesting is typically linked to policing tactics, which have evolved over time. Recent approaches draw on the concept of "strategic incapacitation," involving coercive measures such as no-protest zones, increased use of "less-lethal" weapons, preemptive arrests, and intensified surveillance of social movements (Noakes and Gillham, 2006). These "strategic incapacitation" measures can be seen in recent developments in Georgia.

GD's response to protests against its decision to suspend EU accession talks until 2028 was harsh. The police used water cannons, tear gas, and rubber bullets, causing numerous injuries. Videos reveal excessive force used against peaceful demonstrators and journalists (Human Rights Watch, 2024). In the early days of protests, some activists retaliated with Molotov cocktails and stones, leading to approximately 250 arrests on charges of disobedience and hooliganism. Human rights organizations have documented police brutality, torture, and the denial of medical care. Subsequent legal proceedings have disregarded fair trial standards and no officials have been held accountable—reinforcing a culture of impunity (Amnesty International, 2024). Additionally, GD has designated no-protest zones and enacted legislation prohibiting the blockading of highways, as well as advanced further proposals to ban protests in enclosed areas (Civil Georgia, 2025a). Moreover, police now engage protesters with full-face masks

¹ Five interviews were conducted by the author with Georgian NGO representatives and activists in October 2024, prior to the parliamentary elections, to explore their experiences with protest policing. Although the analysis specifically refers to events that occurred after the elections, the research indicates that the politics of protest policing did not improve; in fact, the situation worsened. Therefore, the respondents' experiences remain relevant and important for understanding current protest policing in Georgia. The interviews were conducted online using a semi-structured format, allowing for probing responses and the expansion of answers when necessary. Ethical considerations in this research align with established social science ethics standards. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, who were provided with detailed information regarding the purpose of the research, its funding, and data protection procedures. Participants were assured of confidentiality and anonymity concerning the use of their personal data.

and without identification badges. Any verbal or physical interactions with officers—even in self-defense—are classified as assaults and carry prison sentences of up to seven years. The case of journalist Mzia Amaglobeli exemplifies the arbitrary use of legal instruments to suppress dissent. Arrested twice on January 12—first for posting a protest sticker and later as a criminal suspect—she was ultimately accused of assaulting an officer. As of writing, she has been on a hunger strike for about 25 days and faces up to seven years in prison (Amnesty International, 2025; BBC News, 2025). GD’s escalating methods of repression—using both legal and physical tactics to suppress dissent and maintain political control—resonate strongly with the concept of “strategic incapacitation” as advanced elsewhere (Howe and Monaghan, 2018; Crosby and Walby, 2023).

A Broader Means of Protest Criminalization: Juridifying Authoritarian Policy

It is argued that regimes target activists not only using criminal law, but also through administrative measures (Selmini and Di Ronco, 2023). To date in 2025, GD has announced legislative changes almost every day, limiting fundamental rights and restricting regulations for the media, civil society, and activists (Civil Georgia, 2025d). It is noteworthy that GD’s repression extends beyond criminal law to administrative measures. For example, following the 2024 elections, the government enacted draconian laws further restricting the freedom of assembly. These new laws prohibit fireworks and face coverings at protests, increase penalties for protest-related offenses, and allow police to detain individuals for up to 48 hours based on suspicions of planning to violate public assembly regulations (Social Justice Centre, 2024; Amnesty International, 2025). While the police enjoy anonymity and immunity, the new laws prohibit protesters from concealing their identities or even protect themselves from the tear gas. In early February, GD extended maximum administrative detention from 15 to 60 days and proposed banning protests in enclosed spaces. Additional legal changes tighten penalties for police assault, disobedience, and verbal offenses against government officials. Even spontaneous protests must now be reported to local authorities (Gvazdabia, 2025). These developments illustrate GD’s systematic use of legal mechanisms to entrench its authoritarian policies.

In social movement studies, protest criminalization is often linked to state repression, which encompasses state efforts to restrict the actions and beliefs of its citizens through sanctions or violence, including torture, mass killings, and disappearances (Davenport, 2005). While Georgia’s case highlights the use of physical repression and administrative/criminal legal restrictions, GD’s efforts to suppress dissent also extend

beyond the criminal and administrative legal spheres. For instance, public servants openly supporting protests have faced dismissals facilitated by legal amendments to employment protections. Human rights organizations warn of deteriorating labor rights, citing multiple cases of politically motivated firings (Institute for Development of Freedom of Information, 2024). GD has also targeted institutions where employees opposed government policies. For example, the Georgian parliament initiated the liquidation of a research center and, in early February, GD announced the dissolution of the Civil Service Bureau (Civil Georgia, 2025b). These measures illustrate how GD has systematically weaponized legal instruments to suppress opposition, consolidate power, and stifle democratic freedoms across Georgia. It also reveals the importance of the police and their loyalty to the regime.

Police Patronage and Impunity

Recent developments in Georgia indicate that GD is using the police as a tool for regime survival. Analyzing GD politics of police governance also indicate that the main tool for controlling the police is GD’s longstanding practice of appointing party loyalists—or Ivanishvili’s personal allies—to top police positions (Marat, 2018). Key appointments highlight this patronage and favoritism, including the current Minister of Internal Affairs Vakhtang Gomelauri who was formerly Ivanishvili’s bodyguard. Before starting work as Minister of Internal Affairs, he was appointed head of Georgia’s security services with no prior public sector experience and is currently sanctioned by several countries for violating human rights in Georgia (Ostiller, 2024).

This staffing strategy aligns with Weber’s concept of “appropriation,” where loyalty and favoritism rather than merit dictate appointments (Weber, 1920). This approach has entrenched high-level patronage in Georgia’s police force, affecting police independence, particularly in protest policing. Protest responses—such as those during the “foreign agents law” protests and the current demonstrations—reflect the influence of patrimonial practices on police operations. Studies have shown that protest policing tests the nature of the police and the political aspirations of those in power (Douglas, 2024), because police and government are intertwined. As Bayley (1990, p. 189) describes it, the “police are to government as the edge is to the knife.” The main question in Georgia’s case is what the protest policing shows about the connections of leadership-level patronage and its influence on patrimonial practices in police operations.

Interviews reveal that police officers rely heavily on orders from superiors (Interview/NGO representative;

Interview/Activist)—especially during large-scale operations—and have little room for independent judgment (Interview/NGO representative). Protesters reported that police actions seemed to follow direct orders, regardless of their legality or proportionality (Interview/Activist). In a democratic system, officers are expected to enforce only lawful and constitutional commands (Manning, 2010). However, Georgia’s police culture—influenced by a militarized, command-and-control structure reminiscent of Soviet policing—promotes blind obedience to superiors (Interview/NGO representative). This culture is reinforced by a lack of institutional support for officers who resist unlawful orders, making them dependent on obedience to superiors for job security and protection. But is this only a matter of culture?

Notably, soon after protests erupted, the Ministry of Internal Affairs announced new police recruitment measures, lowering the admission standards (Georgian public broadcaster, 2024). The inexperience and questionable qualifications of these new recruits make them more vulnerable to job loss, further pressuring them to obey superiors unconditionally. As a result, officers enforce commands without question, fostering a system where obedience guarantees impunity—a hallmark of patrimonialism. Some police officers and officials who opposed the government’s protest policing policies resigned and were forced to leave the country, citing threats to their families (Civil Georgia, 2024).

Patronage has also been revealed through the guaranteed impunity for police officers and GD leadership. Despite ongoing reports from human rights organizations about police abuse, torture, and ill-treatment, no officers have faced accountability (United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, 2025). Moreover, violence against protesters is openly encouraged by police leadership and state officials. For instance, the head of a special task unit, who is seen beating a protester in a viral video, remains unpunished. Moreover, rhetoric justifying police violence has become pervasive among state officials. A particularly symbolic act was the awarding of Georgia’s Order of Merit to police officials sanctioned by multiple countries for severe human rights violations (Ostiller, 2024). Unsurprisingly awards were

given to police officials by the de facto president of Georgia, known for supporting the controversial “foreign agents law”, nominated as the sole presidential candidate by billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili and elected unopposed by the one-party parliament of Georgia (Civil Georgia, 2025c).

Conclusion

The criminalization of protests in Georgia is not merely a set of ad hoc repressive measures, but a well-orchestrated strategy to silence people and entrench power. By deploying police forces in full riot gear, enacting permanent, restrictive legislation, and manipulating legal frameworks, GD has systematically eroded the right to peaceful assembly. The party’s tactics align with the global trend of protest criminalization in which governments deploy legal, administrative, and violent methods to undermine protests while maintaining an appearance of legality. The disproportionate use of force, arbitrary detentions, and judicial harassment of activists, journalists, and opposition members indicate an alarming shift toward autocratic rule. GD has also weaponized employment policies to punish dissenters, dismissing public servants and dissolving institutions that challenge its authority. These actions reflect a broader attempt to dismantle democratic institutions and consolidate power under single-party rule.

Central to this repressive framework is the patronage-based police system, where law enforcement operates under direct political control rather than democratic oversight. The appointment of loyalists to key security positions ensures unwavering obedience, reinforcing a culture where police impunity is the norm. Once again, Georgia stands at a crossroads. It can either reclaim its democratic trajectory or continue down a path of authoritarianism. The fate of the country now hinges on the resilience of its people and the pressure exerted by both domestic and international forces to hold GD accountable. Without sustained resistance, the criminalization of protests and growth of police impunity in Georgia may solidify into a long-term authoritarian reality, leaving little room for a democratic recovery.

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ANALYSIS

Georgian-Russian Relations: A Shift from Influence to Ideological Convergence

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Abstract

Since the Russo-Georgian war in 2008, formal diplomatic relations between Georgia and Russia have been suspended, yet economic, cultural, and humanitarian ties persist and have even strengthened since Russia’s 2022 invasion of Ukraine. This article examines the key areas of converging interests between Russian and Georgian political elites, the potential for restored diplomatic relations, and the implications for Georgia and the South Caucasus. The Kremlin exerts leverage over Georgian politics through security, economic, ideological, and religious factors. Georgia’s economic dependence on Russia has grown, with increasing exports to Russia and a surge in Russian business registrations in Georgia. The Georgian Dream (GD) party’s ideological alignment with Russia, including the adoption of legislation mirroring Russian laws, further enables Russian influence. While normalization of relations is signaled by Moscow, contingent on Georgia’s recognition of South Ossetia and Abkhazia as independent entities, the possibility of deeper alignment remains uncertain. The West’s strategy is crucial to prevent Georgia from drifting further into Russia’s sphere of influence and to protect the region’s rule-based systems.

Introduction

For more than 15 years, since the Russo-Georgian war of 2008 and Russia’s recognition of two occupied territories as independent states, there have been no formal diplomatic relations between Georgia and Russia. As there is only a ceasefire agreement between the Kremlin and Tbilisi, the two countries are formally in a state of war with each other.¹ Nonetheless, relations between Georgia and Russia continue to thrive, especially in eco-

conomic, cultural, and humanitarian fields. With Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and the subsequent geopolitical cataclysms, relations between the two governments driven by “pragmatic” interests accelerated even further.

As Georgia continues its descent into self-imposed authoritarianism and international isolation, Tbilisi is expected to further align itself with Moscow and Beijing. However, Georgian authorities deny allegations

¹ Russia keeps violating this ceasefire by maintaining its troops in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, as well as recognizing both territories as independent states.

of pursuing an authoritarian agenda and insist they are not steering the nation away from its path toward European integration. This article examines some of the key areas around which Russian and Georgian political elites' interests intersect and how far the relationship could develop? Could the current trend lead to the restoration of diplomatic relations and what would the price be for Tbilisi? What leverage does the Kremlin have to meddle in and influence Georgia? And what are some of the potential implications of this process for the future of the country and the South Caucasus in general.

The Kremlin's Leverage over Georgian Politics

The geographic proximity of Georgia to Russia, i.e. sharing a border, creates security and economic vulnerabilities that translate into leverage points in the hands of the Kremlin. These are related to security, economics, ideology, and religion. This section briefly summarizes each of these leverage points and the challenges they pose, while the next section explores how far the convergence of interests between Georgian and Russian ruling political elites could go.

Security Challenges

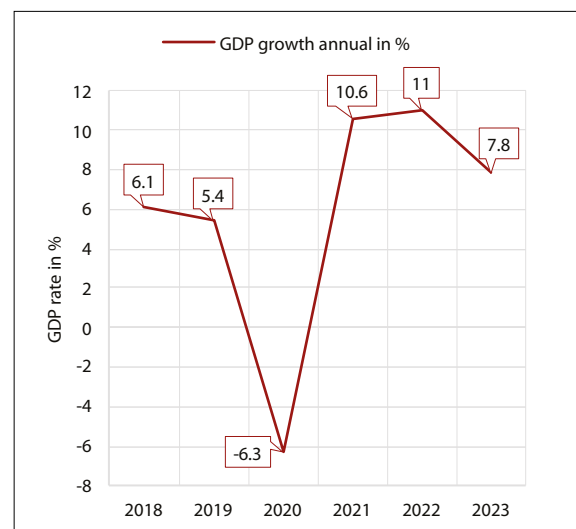
As a frontline state in the “gray zone,” outside the safety of NATO's security umbrella, Georgia faces daunting tasks. The Russian Federation continues to violate the 2008 ceasefire agreement and maintains a heavy military presence in two breakaway territories of Georgia. The presence of Russian troops in these regions and the “lack of strategic engagement” from the US may have encouraged Russia to advance its interests in Georgia (Zurabishvili, 2025), which makes Russia a constant factor in the country's internal politics. This was illustrated in the preelection campaign of the ruling Georgian Dream (GD) party, which was largely based on cultivating fear of a new war with Russia (Reuters 2024). The ruling party even used images of bombed cities and buildings in Ukraine to make the point (Kincha 2024). Since 2022, GD has been promoting a conspiracy theory which claims that the West is attempting to drag Georgia into a war with Russia. To put it differently, as long as Georgia remains vulnerable to both direct military and hybrid tactics coming from the Kremlin, Russia has important leverage over the internal politics of the country. This appeal to existential threat and war is also a strong instrument in the hands of GD to legitimize state capture, democratic backsliding, and one-party rule.

Increasing Economic Dependence

Since coming to power in 2012, Georgian Dream (GD) has emphasized a policy of strategic patience toward Moscow, which involved accommodating Russia's strate-

gic interests while focusing on fostering economic and humanitarian relations. As a result, during the last decade, Georgia-Russian economic relations have steadily grown, increasing the economic vulnerability of Georgia. Data shows that while in 2012 Georgia exported just 4.4% of all exports to Russia, by 2023 this number had reached 10.8% (Transparency International Georgia 2024). Following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine—instead of isolating Moscow or joining the sanctions imposed by the West—the GD government strengthened its ties with Russia, significantly increasing trade and reaping financial benefits. In return, Moscow rewarded Tbilisi by reinstating direct flights and granting Georgians visa-free travel to Russia. Meanwhile, Russian businesses in Georgia have thrived, with the number of Russian business registrations more than tripling since the onset of the war in Ukraine (IDFI 2024). Moreover, Georgia experienced significant economic growth since 2022, driven by several factors. The arrival of tens of thousands of relatively affluent Russians relocating to the country contributed to heightened economic activity. Additionally, increased trade and transit through the so-called “Middle Corridor” further boosted economic performance. These combined factors enabled Georgia to record double-digit economic growth during this period (Figure 1). As a result, the Georgian economy got a much needed boost in the post-Covid recovery period.

Figure 1: GDP Growth (Annual %)—Georgia 2018–2023



Source: World Bank Data. Available at: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.KD.ZG?end=2023&locations=GE&start=2018>

These data suggest that in the short-term, Georgia gained economic benefits from increasing economic activities with Russia, especially because of the war in Ukraine.

However, as illustrated by the recent examples of the Russian government using economic relations as political tool,² this mode of growth is not sustainable in the long run and actually makes Georgia more vulnerable. Furthermore, when the West begins to lift some of its sanctions against Russia, this model of economic growth could be undermined.

Religion and Ideological Convergence as a Factor of Influence

Another significant factor enabling Russian influence and hybrid warfare activities in Georgia is the Georgian Dream party's ideological alignment with Russia and similar "conservative discourse" (Kakachia and Kakabadze, 2024). Along with cultivating fear, the ruling party's preelection campaign was also focused around an anti-LGBTQI narrative and fighting what it called "liberal fascism" (Civil Georgia 2023). In September 2024, just a couple of weeks before the parliamentary elections, GD adopted the bill "On the Protection of Family Values and Minors" which resembles Russia's 2011 ban of LGBTQI propaganda and represents a major threat to the freedom of expression and the right of assembly (Civil Georgia 2024). No less alarming was the adoption of the bill "On the Transparency of Foreign Influence" aimed to curtail civil society and which is very similar to the initial version of Russia's foreign agent law (Civil Georgia 2024b). Speculation on whether those bills came directly from the Kremlin or were the GD's own initiative is beyond the scope of this paper. However, what these developments indicate is that—in its pursuit of retaining power through brazenly manipulated parliamentary elections—Georgia's ruling party heavily borrows from Putin's playbook, leading to greater ideological convergence between Tbilisi and Moscow.

How Far Could This Go?

Ideological alignment with Russia and emulating its model of one-party, unaccountable rule provides GD with greater opportunities to maintain power indefinitely and with impunity. However, the Georgian government's current estrangement with Euro-Atlantic partners and anti-Western conspiracy theories leave the country's political leadership in complete international isolation. As of writing, none of the major Western countries have recognized Georgia's recent parliamentary election results as legitimate. Since 2024, EU integration has remained stalled because of Tbilisi's authoritarian tendencies. Moreover, in December of the same year, the US officially suspended its strategic partnership with Georgia.

Isolation from its Western partners also leaves Georgia more vulnerable to the influence of illiberal regional powers that are gearing up to shape the future security architecture of the Caucasus for the decades to come. Iran and Russia's strategic partnership deal (Aljazeera 2025), along with rising Chinese interest and the unpredictability that Trump's presidency holds for the free world, puts the long-established *status quo* of Georgian foreign policy under extreme pressure. The congruence of GD's domestic agenda with Russian geopolitical goals enables Moscow to wield influence and achieve geopolitical advantages (Sabanadze 2025). Given this future, Russia's strategic goal is likely to focus on maintaining tight control over the eastern part of the Black Sea, curbing Western influence, and sidelining the West from the region. This strategy includes pressuring Tbilisi to formally join the 3+3 regional format which excludes Western partners and advances other post-Soviet integration projects dominated by Russia.

Moreover, as the GD government's relations with the West become more toxic, Moscow has signaled its intent to normalize relations with Tbilisi, contingent on Tbilisi's acceptance of the so-called "existing realities on the ground," implying recognition of South Ossetia and Abkhazia as independent entities. Meanwhile, as Moscow contemplates a potential shift in its stance toward Georgia, Tbilisi seems to be probing whether Russia's position on Georgia's territorial integrity has shifted in response to evolving global and regional dynamics. Despite the recent thaw in relations—raising cautious hopes for bilateral improvement—it remains uncertain whether GD's ideological alignment with the Kremlin will deepen to a qualitatively new level. As GD's appeasement policy towards Moscow strengthens the perception of a deliberate return of Georgia into Russia's sphere of influence, the Kremlin hopes that the steady development of relations with Georgia will eventually lead to the "full restoration of diplomatic ties at some stage" (Civil Georgia, 2025). Such a prospect remains rather unlikely as long as no resolution is reached regarding Russia's violation of international law through its occupation of approximately 20% of Georgia's territory. Yet, this does not exclude the possibility of Tbilisi pivoting more toward Russia through the 3+3 format (Javakhishvili 2022), BRICS, or other similar platforms. In this fragile context, the West must undertake careful and strategic deliberation.

Conclusion

As the global divide between autocratic and democratic countries becomes more pronounced, Georgia serves as an ideological battleground between Russia and the

2 For example, the ban of Georgian wine from the Russian market in 2006 or the suspension of direct flights in 2019.

West. The struggle for influence in Georgia offers valuable insights into Russia's strategies for reclaiming its imperial power. Currently, the country is mired in a deep political crisis, marked by disputed parliamentary election results and a situation in which two presidents refuse to recognize each other's legitimacy. This political deadlock, compounded by diverging interests among the political elite, has exacerbated societal tensions and revealed a deeply rooted ambivalence toward Russia.

These conditions are favorable for Russia, which leverages its "conservative soft power" (Keating/Kaczmarek 2019) to interfere and exploit them for its own advantage. Domains which offer Russia space for hybrid intervention tactics include security, economics, ideology, and religion. These are also the points of intersection where the increasingly authoritarian-leaning GD party's and Russian political leadership's interests coincide. Despite arguments propagated by GD that Western values conflict with Georgian traditions and that EU integration would threaten Georgian sovereignty and culture, the vast majority of Georgian society supports the coun-

try's pro-European foreign policy. This exerts bottom-up pressure on the ruling party. If both internal and external pressure can be put on GD to backtrack and find a political solution to the deepening crisis, Georgian democracy may still hold a chance. Rejuvenating liberal democracy will have considerable impact on the region, potentially providing a larger window for the West to the Black Sea region and limiting the increasing ideological expansion of illiberal powers such as Russia and China.

In this precarious situation, much also hinges on the West's strategy, which must eschew acts that could draw Tbilisi nearer to Moscow. Losing Georgia to Russian influence would diminish the West's strategic influence and credibility in the wider Black Sea region. Georgia is far from a lost cause, as it still serves as potential model of democratic resilience. In this delicate situation, the US and the EU need to shift into a much more proactive and forward leaning posture to stop Russia's ideological and geopolitical expansion and protect the region's rule-based systems.

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ANALYSIS

Georgia's Withdrawal from the EU Accession Process: Reasons, Consequences, and EU Reactions

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Abstract

In contrast to the manipulated parliamentary elections in Georgia on October 26, 2024, the subsequent announcement by the Georgian Dream leadership to suspend accession negotiations with the EU until the end of 2028 has sparked ongoing protests in Georgia. Three arguments are put forward: First, the often-cited figure of 80% EU support among Georgians glosses over a more complex (geo)economic situation Georgia finds itself in, which at least partly explains why protests remained limited immediately after the elections. Second, I argue that Georgian Dream went a step too far—even for its own supporters—when it suspended EU accession negotiations, a move which could potentially have far-reaching consequences for Georgia's future political development. Third, the EU's reaction was not unified and firm due to internal rifts within the EU. It therefore depends heavily on the mobilizing power of the protest movement to ensure that Georgia does not become a second Belarus.

Introduction

After the parliamentary elections on October 26, 2024, which both independent Georgian and international observers suspect was manipulated by the ruling party Georgian Dream (GD), protests at the local level remained relatively limited. Considering that the GD stands for a policy of "appeasement" towards Russia that distances Georgia from European integration (Lebandize and Kakachia, 2023; Bogishvili, 2024), the relatively low mobilization was surprising. How is this explainable given that frequently quoted polls show 80% of the Georgian population are in favour of EU accession?

In fact, the situation is more complex. It is true that pre-election polls conducted by institutes close to the opposition predicted that GD—which has been in power since 2012—would not win an absolute majority. At the same time, these polls predicted that the ruling party would still receive around 40%

of the vote. Thus, even without electoral fraud, GD appears to be the strongest political force in Georgia. This is because even among supporters of EU accession, opinions differ when it comes to certain issues such as LGBTQ rights. The electorate in Georgia is characterized by an urban-rural divide. Those who live in the cities tend to have liberal values and vote for the opposition parties, while those who live in rural areas have more traditional family values and are more likely to vote for GD (CRRC 2023; Halligan 2024). In addition, Georgia has seen double-digit economic growth in recent years under the leadership of GD (Staske 2024). Although forecasts are now lower, many associate the party with modest but growing prosperity (Röthig, 2024).

The situation changed, however, after the announcement by Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze on November 28, 2024 to suspend accession negotiations with the EU until 2028. Tens of thousands of

protesters are now regularly on the streets. Moreover, the protests are not limited to Tbilisi, but are also taking place in other Georgian cities from Gori to Batumi. While younger people seem to dominate the protests, observers note that mobilization is cross-generational (Franke et al. 2025; Malerius & Binder, 2024).

Presumably, the Georgian government has gone a step too far with its announcement to suspend EU accession negotiations, even for its own voters, who may not support everything that comes with European integration but still want to keep doors to EU (and NATO) accession open. That is why GD's decision to pull out of EU accession negotiations in late November 2024 sparked greater mobilization among protesters than their rigged elections a month earlier.

Reasons for GD's Decision to Suspend EU Accession Negotiations

The EU had already put accession negotiations with Georgia on hold in June 2024 in response to Georgia's adoption of the so-called "foreign agent" law and other legislation not conforming to fundamental political norms of the EU. The fact that Georgia is now following suit is further proof that the ruling GD party is turning its back on the EU and looking toward Russia and China.

One important factor in this decision is the oligarch Bidzina Ivanishvili who routinely influences the decisions made by the Georgian government. His power is based on controlling the courts and maintaining patronage networks that permeate the entire Georgian state apparatus. More transparency and the rule of law, which the EU is constantly calling for, would undermine Ivanishvili's power. Ivanishvili also has close connections to Russian elites. In the past, GD could proclaim its pro-EU stance (which never meant being anti-Russian) without significant consequences because the EU had not granted Georgia candidate status.

However, the situation changed dramatically in December 2023, when the European Council declared Georgia an official EU candidate. Even the previous governments under GD had been reluctant to turn the EU into the only game in town in Georgia. In terms of trade, for example, Georgia—unlike Ukraine and Moldova—is still closer to Russia, Kazakhstan, and the other countries of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) than to the EU. In 2023, exports to the EU accounted for 12% of Georgia's total exports. Russia's share was at 11% and the share of other CIS countries at 55%. In terms of imports, the EU is at 25%, while Russia and the CIS together account for 22% (German Economic Team, 2024).

Furthermore, previous GD-led governments have allowed China to engage massively in building Georgia's

infrastructure. While many projects, like the Rikoti Pass project, have been financed by a consortium of multi-lateral development banks, albeit constructed by Chinese state-owned firms (Krüsmann et al. 2023), the Chinese government invested directly in building a deep-sea port in Anaklia. Like the Rikoti Pass, the deep-sea port is supposed to form an important part of the so-called "Middle Corridor" connecting Asia and Europe. The decision to announce this the day after the Georgian parliament adopted the so-called "foreign agent" law is unlikely to be a coincidence. The move has been interpreted as a message that Georgia has alternatives to Western investors (Standish & Pertaia, 2024). At that time, Georgia's attractiveness as an investment destination for Western investors was already suffering because of the political turmoil surrounding the foreign agent law and other legislation deemed incompatible with EU norms and standards (Reuters, 2024).

In sum, it is in the interests of Georgia's ruling elites to leave doors open to Russia and China as well as free Georgia from EU pressure that would make it much more difficult to maintain patronage networks. Still, the decision to suspend EU accession negotiations has resulted in unintended consequences for GD. While the pro-EU camp felt disillusioned and paralyzed after the manipulated parliamentary elections, GD's decision to suspend accession negotiations garnered the camp new support from societal forces. Apparently, GD did not expect this.

Consequences of Georgia Halting its Accession Efforts

The goal of EU accession is enshrined in the Georgian constitution. In merely suspending the negotiations (and waiving EU funding), the GD government is attempting to avoid a breach of the constitution. This "trick" allows GD to also claim that it wants to continue to meet its obligations under the Association Agreement, which may cater to some GD voters. Many members of the opposition and protesters, however, interpret this decision as a complete withdrawal from the EU accession process. This has far-reaching consequences for the country's future development and allows for continued autocratization.

Neither United nor Firm: EU Responses

The EU's response to these recent developments in Georgia is not united. Hungary's Prime Minister Viktor Orbán was the first to fly to Tbilisi and congratulate GD for its victory, praising the government for being "conservative, Christian and pro-European." Similarly, both Hungary and Slovakia blocked the implementation of a series of EU measures against Georgian officials that would have included visa bans and asset freezes in

December 2024, leaving the EU to limit its measures to the suspension of visa-liberalization procedures for Georgian diplomatic passport holders. Loopholes for circumvention seem to remain, however (Chkhikvadze, 2025).

On the other hand, the EU did withhold funds from Georgia and started to re-allocate them to civil society organizations and independent media, as the EU Commissioner for Enlargement Marta Kos underlined in January 2025 (Kos, 2025). The pace could be faster though. Of the approximately 121 million EUR, 6.5 million have been re-allocated so far and a further 7 million are expected to be released soon to counter disinformation by GD. The European Parliament (EP) adopted a resolution recognizing President Salome Zurbishvili as a legitimate representative, and supporting personal sanctions against Ivanishvili and leading figures of GD, including asset freezes in some cases. Members of the EP from extreme-right fractions, such as Europe of Sovereign Nations party group or the Patriots for Europe did not support the resolution, rejecting any EU inter-

ventions and, instead, upholding Georgia's sovereignty. This is a foretaste of how the EP's stance could change in the future as more extreme-right governments come to power in EU member states.

It is obvious that the EU should not be indifferent to further developments in Georgia. Brussels risks losing its stance as a "normative power" among Georgia's pro-EU camp by being unable to deliver firm reactions quickly. Also, Georgia has important strategic significance as a transit country for both Russia and the EU (see Meister, 2025).

Looking at the EU reactions so far, further developments in Georgia will primarily depend on the mobilization power and stamina of the Georgian protest movement. Unlike the protests in spring 2024 against the adoption of the so-called "foreign agents" law, state officials are now officially joining in—despite losing their job for their political activities (see Civil Georgia, 2024). This is a promising sign. Nevertheless, there is a high risk that the protests will be violently stifled, as in Belarus.

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